

POSITION PAPER: Strengthening ASEAN's COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout and Economic Recovery

OVERVIEW

Providing affordable, fair, and equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines remain a top policy priority in Southeast Asia, as the region continues to work towards vaccinating over 650 million people.

Vaccination progress, however, remains uneven across ASEAN nations contributing to divergence of growth paths in the region. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), three of the region's 10 ASEAN member states (AMS) – Singapore, Cambodia, and Malaysia – have fully vaccinated a greater proportion of their populations than the United States (51.8%) and the European Union (58%). As a whole, only 30% of Southeast Asia's population have been fully vaccinated, with five AMS having less than a third of their population vaccinated.¹

The ADB has noted that economies that have vaccinated larger proportions of their populations experience a quicker recovery from the pandemic slump. Accordingly, the Canada-ASEAN Business Council (CABC) views raising COVID-19 vaccination rates in the ASEAN region as critical to reopening borders safely, resuming economic activity, and progressing towards economic recovery.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In Southeast Asia, the support of the private sector has significantly contributed towards vaccine procurement. With Canadian companies leading by example, and recognizing the differences in national vaccine rollout programs, the private sector can help accelerate vaccination by:
 - a. Directly purchasing vaccines for employees
 - b. Financially supporting vaccine rollout programs implemented by governments and other partners
 - c. Offering resources and/or other support (*such as PPE, storage facilities, vaccination centers, and logistical support to reach rural populations*)
 - d. Donating to government funds such as the Vietnam Vaccine Fund and ASEAN's COVID-19 Response Fund
 - e. Demonstrate leadership and social responsibility by contributing to vaccine research, advocacy, and education
2. Leveraging on ASEAN's convening power, government agencies within ASEAN need to urgently work towards stronger regional integration. This means:
 - a. Pursuing a multilateral approach to increasing vaccine production, procurement, and distribution, including providing additional assistance to countries that have difficulty funding national vaccine programs and struggle with the 'last-mile' challenge
 - b. Achieving mutual vaccine recognition regionally to facilitate cross-border travel
 - c. Establishing a regional knowledge center to provide research and long-term strategies for public health crises, in order to inform improved mechanisms for vaccine rollouts in the future
 - d. Pursuing a multilateral approach to reducing vaccine hesitancy, including campaigns to reduce false information surrounding vaccines in specific countries

¹ "Low Vaccination Rates are Hurting Southeast Asia's Economy: ADB," The Diplomat, 22 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/low-vaccination-rates-are-hurting-southeast-asias-economy-adb/>.

CABC: MEMBERS' RESPONSE ON ASEAN'S VACCINE ROLLOUT

Similar to many in the business community, CABC Members have been affected by the slow vaccine rollouts in many ASEAN countries. To better understand their concerns, between August and October 2021, CABC reached out to the members to get their views on the situation and how it can be improved. From this input, the following recommendations are put forward:

- It is recommended that ASEAN should work towards **establishing a regional center for public health research and vaccine provision**, in order to share best practices and support for improving public health systems.
 - Our Members indicated that in many Southeast Asian countries, **the Governments experienced delays in delivering foreign vaccine donations**. Going forward, health systems need to be strengthened in order to distribute vaccines quickly and effectively to all areas of the population.
 - Knowledge and resources may also be shared from private sector actors and non-ASEAN governments in order to remain resilient amidst future pandemics.
- The Canadian government and private sector companies should play **an active role in raising awareness for the vaccination situation in Southeast Asia and the mechanisms through which aid can be delivered** (e.g., *Vaccine Funds, donations to certain organizations, etc.*) in order to spur more collective action and funding.
 - Our Members indicated that raising awareness of the evolving situation across Southeast Asian countries and the need to acquire vaccines is essential in increasing external support.
- ASEAN to **increase efforts towards reducing vaccine hesitancy**, witnessed in many Asian countries. To accelerate vaccination rates, ASEAN needs to not only address the lack of supply, but also the lack of will to get vaccinated once doses become available.
 - This includes fighting false information with public awareness and contributing best practices for behavioral interventions (*such as social media campaigns, on-the-ground outreach to the unvaccinated, etc.*).
- ASEAN to work towards **mutual vaccine recognition** based on the success of other countries/regions, such as the European Union (EU).
 - By adopting evidence-based approaches and leveraging the use of digital technology, ASEAN can work towards the safe reopening of borders and the resumption of business activity required to jumpstart the region's growth.

“We haven't witnessed much coordination between ASEAN countries yet. Better coordination would be welcome, especially to facilitate mobility [and travel].”

“There should be more emphasis on cooperation between ASEAN states on accepting each other's vaccination and testing programs when it comes to business travellers.”

Responses from CABC Members

KEY ACTIONS: CANADIAN PRIVATE SECTOR EXAMPLE

CABC Members continue to take an active role in **contributing to both regional and national vaccine funds in order to increase vaccination rates**. Our members have also **demonstrated leadership** by setting internal policies for vaccination uptake within their companies, while also **advocating and lobbying** for the countries in which they operate to gain early access to vaccines for frontline staff.

As one of CABC's patron members, Manulife has been at the forefront through supporting their employees, customers, and the communities where they operate during the pandemic. As a leading life and health insurer in Asia, the company introduced **a suite of special life and health insurance benefits** for their customers in several ASEAN markets, such as **simpler claims processes, waiving medical deductibles, hospital cash benefits, and deferring premium payments.**

Manulife had robust and tested business continuity plans in place prior to the pandemic that helped ensure it was prepared for unexpected situations, such as remote work capabilities for employees in critical functions. Because they have invested heavily in technology, nearly all employees in Asia (approximately 15,000), are able to work from home productively. As social distancing measures were put in place around the world, Manulife accelerated its plans to roll out a **suite of digital tools** across Asia, enabling **non-face-to-face engagement** between agents and customers and **providing greater financial protection.**

Manulife views an effective vaccine rollout as an important conduit for economic recovery for the ASEAN region, not just for the insurance industry, but across all sectors. Vaccination against COVID-19 is seen as key to protecting people and supporting public health. In many ASEAN markets, Manulife offers **practical support** to help employees, financial advisors, customers, and communities get vaccinated through various programs.

Manulife has always encouraged their employees and customers who are able to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and they have supported vaccination efforts in various ways. This has included **providing paid time off to employees to be vaccinated** and **securing access to vaccines in areas where it has been more challenging to do so**, including in ASEAN countries.

For example, in the Philippines, Manulife has [provided free COVID-19 vaccination](#) for its employees and agents. This includes more than 8,500 employees of Manulife Philippines, Manulife China Bank Life, Manulife Investment Management Trust Corporation, Manulife Business Processing Services (MBPS), and Manulife IT Delivery Center Asia (MITDC), as well as Manulife Philippines' active insurance advisors and agency leaders.

In Indonesia, Manulife, together with the crowdfunding platform BenihBaik.com, [donated more than 500 oxygen cylinders](#) worth more than Rp 1.3 billion as part of its effort to support Indonesia's COVID-19 response measures amid the pandemic across the country. The equipment donated were distributed to various health facilities in different locations throughout the country.

And in Malaysia, Manulife has provided [free COVID-19 coverage for non-Manulife customers](#). Available for enrolment online from 15 September 2021 to 15 October 2021, this free COVID-19 coverage provided a guaranteed lump sum payment of RM5,000 in the event of death from COVID-19. Registration was limited to the first 80,000 successful enrolment and was open to Malaysians and permanent residents of Malaysia aged 21 to 60 years old. They must not hold any Manulife insurance policies to get this coverage.

The above examples highlight that private sector actors, such as those from the life and health insurance industry, can play a significant role in supporting vaccine rollouts and hence positioning countries in the ASEAN region for growth after the pandemic. The business community across other industry sectors are also doing their part. CABC will continue to work with its members and with ASEAN to help raise COVID-19 vaccination rates in the region and progress towards economic recovery.

Special thanks to CABC Patron Member:  **Manulife**